

*Household appliances and the use of time: the United States and Britain since the 1920s: a comment*¹

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I have argued elsewhere that a revolution is currently under way in or, more exactly, around economics.² Briefly, far from abandoning its well-established mode and content of reasoning, economics is seeking vigorously to colonize other social sciences through the extension of its method based on optimizing agents. Much progress has already been made by way of cliometrics, although quantitative economic history does not logically entail reliance upon neoclassical theory. Further, the creeping influence of economics is often piecemeal. Its concepts are deployed without examining overall conceptual consistency other than through eclecticism. The notion of human capital is the leading example. Significantly, it derives its widespread use from the popularization of the notion by Becker, a leading economist seeking to universalize standard economic methodology. He has also ‘inspired’ the work of Bowden and Offer.³ This comment demonstrates how their work has thus acquired an arbitrary content and points to an alternative approach.

I

The reliance of Bowden and Offer on Becker draws only upon his work on the family and the use of time.⁴ Time is particularly important for Bowden and Offer since they do not refer to personal and social capital, although these form the generalization of human capital within what Becker terms ‘the economic approach’. Instead, they proxy such capitals in two different ways—as time itself and as the materialized productivity of time or physically durable (consumer) equipment.

Significantly, both concepts are ahistorical, although used to explain

¹ The author thanks referees and others for comments on earlier drafts.

² Fine, ‘New revolution; *idem*, ‘Triumph of economics’; *idem*, ‘A question of economics’.

³ Bowden and Offer, ‘Household appliances’, p. 728; also Bowden and Offer, ‘Technological revolution’.

⁴ Becker, ‘Allocation of time’; *idem*, *Treatise on the family*. See also *idem*, *Human capital* for treatment of human capital, and *idem*, *Accounting for tastes*, for an overview of all of his work, especially that concerned with matters outside human capital and the new household economics. For a critique of Becker in the context of consumption, see Fine, ‘Triumph of economics’; *idem*, ‘Playing the consumption game’; *idem*, ‘Question of economics’ (above, n. 2); *idem*, ‘From Bourdieu to Becker’.

historically specific outcomes—diffusion of household appliances in the twentieth century. Inevitably, the historical content (in both the use and meaning of goods) has to be added on, potentially in arbitrary and inconsistent ways. For time, a distinction is drawn between that spent on work or domestic obligations and that whose use is discretionary. This is done to enable Bowden and Offer to distinguish between those household appliances that are *time-saving* in enhancing the productivity of housework, so allowing for more discretionary time, and those that are *time-using* in requiring discretionary time in consumption. The duality between time saving and time using is seen as corresponding to producing and consuming within the household, the latter as a source of entertainment. Representative goods are the vacuum cleaner and the television, respectively. The distinction between these different times has resonance with an extrapolation from the world of capitalist work, where time is sold and, in employment, is governed primarily by commercial considerations. As is evident from the domestic labour debate,⁵ there is no corresponding discipline governing time spent outside work. Consequently, distinguishing between time-saving and time-using appliances has limited systematic social basis. Nor is it even rooted in individual decision making. Bowden and Offer admit that 'it is sometimes difficult to disentangle the time-saving and time-using attributes of goods',⁶ referring to television, motor cars, and bicycles. Inverting their own definitional logic and descriptive hypothesis, for example, they classify the telephone as a time-saving appliance because its diffusion follows the pattern that is typical for them of the appliances delineated as time saving.⁷ In short, whether derived by analogy with employment or not, the distinction between time saving and time using does not apply readily to the household where a discipline of time is neither enforced nor liable to be adopted.

Ambiguity also arises in addressing time devoted to *housework*. As Bowden and Offer observe, this stagnated and then fell slightly in the recent period of greater female labour market participation. How is this possible given the adoption, however slowly, of *time-saving* appliances? The answer is in the shifting relative weight of household standards, productivity, and other demands on time. Yet, if standards rise to the point where they exceed home productivity, in cleaning and washing for example, increasing the time devoted to them, this is indistinguishable other than in name of activity, from time using for entertainment through use of leisure appliances. Explanation has become tautological in attaching time saving and time using to housework and leisure/entertainment, respectively. Why do we not say that the standards of domestic entertain-

⁵ Fine, *Women's employment*, appx.

⁶ Bowden and Offer, 'Household appliances', p. 743.

⁷ Ibid, p. 744. For discussion of the changing significance of the telephone, see B. Fine, N. Foster, J. Simister, and J. Wright, 'Access to phones and democracy in personal communication: myth or reality?', SOAS Working Papers in Economics, 20 (1992).

ment have risen rather than that the appliances involved are time-using? For Bowden and Offer:

'Time-saving' goods reduce the time required to complete a specific household task. An electric washing machine reduces the time required to clean a tubful of laundry, compared with manual methods. . . . Time-saving goods can increase the quantity of discretionary time, whereas time-using goods enhance its perceived quality.⁸

But to redefine time using as enhancing the quality of time does not offer a resolution. Is not the *time* spent in cleaner houses or clothes of higher quality, at least subjectively? How do we distinguish between the quality of time as opposed to the quality of the appliances or their output?

Leaving aside the availability of entirely novel services, there are two possibilities. First, an appliance saves time per unit of output, but may be used to provide a proportionately higher or lower level of output so that the actual time commanded can be greater or less than before. If the household introduces an appliance that is not time saving in this sense, it would appear to be behaving inefficiently, since it is paying for a durable without increased labour productivity. Or second, scarcely addressed by Bowden and Offer, the appliance can be a source of utility in and of itself without the use of time at all, as is acknowledged in the case of cars.⁹ The most important example, however, is household accommodation. Presumably the same applies to furniture which is intriguingly associated with appliances because of the closeness of their income elasticities of demand: 'the priority for acquiring time-saving durables was similar to that of furnishing a home, and indeed it is likely that the two activities were related'.¹⁰

But are housing and furnishing time saving, time using, or time enhancing? These ahistorical categories create more conundrums than they resolve!

II

The preceding section suggests, within the Becker framework itself, that the simple division of time between using and saving is fractured by a variety of complications that undermine corresponding categorization of household appliances. In addition, attention has shifted to demand, equally complex, on which Bowden and Offer introduce two further influences. One is the low value placed upon women, whether as consumers or as workers. Their priorities as consumers are deemed to be low for time-saving appliances compared with what are deemed to be non-gendered appliances such as lighting and radio. Leaving aside ambiguity in the gendering of goods as male or female—would food be considered

⁸ Bowden and Offer, 'Household appliances', p. 728.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 743-4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 733. For the argument, in the context of food, that the calculation of such elasticities is highly questionable both in theory and empirically, see Fine et al., *Consumption in the age of affluence*, ch. 7.

non-gendered because all have to eat?—such an argument is insufficiently tight. Even within a patriarchal framework, appliances that save women's working time within the household could, subject to price, still be adopted. For they could be used efficiently to serve men indirectly in other ways, as is evident from the limited reductions in the amounts of female domestic labour when time-saving appliances are adopted.

As workers, women are deemed to be unable to command a sufficiently high wage in the formal economy to warrant substituting for their time in the domestic economy with bought-out appliances. As it is observed that women were often responsible for producing the very goods that could allow, or make it economically viable for, them to work,¹¹ some sort of balance is required in determining how much they worked out of the home to allow them to purchase the appliances that made waged work a viable and adopted choice. For, presumably, the lower women's wages are, the cheaper will be the appliances that they produce. Consequently, it is worth observing the way in which patriarchy, although never so termed, is being used as a residual explanatory factor in an implicitly extensive way and one which is not necessarily consistent with the underlying neoclassical economics employed. For, treating women's time and needs as of low value involves complex issues of conflict between efficiency and distribution both within the household and between the household and the (male?) formal economy. Who controls and gains the advantage from women's work?

Once again, elements of tautological reasoning appear to be involved, with patriarchy relied upon when required but otherwise set aside. Goods are labelled as gendered, or not, according to the identity of those who might benefit from consuming them.¹² But how, then, in a world of patriarchy are we to explain that in the UK in 1936 women's, girls', and children's clothing accounted for a larger share of consumer expenditure (37 per cent) than that of men and boys (26 per cent)?¹³ A separate point in the context of clothing is that the virtues of a washing machine depend upon having sufficient material to wash to make it worthwhile. If the fabric of household consumption, including hardware and hollowware as well as clothing, has yet to be purchased in sufficient quantities, it is hardly surprising that appliances that use them as raw materials are less attractive.

The other factor influencing demand is what can be called *access*. This has two components. On the one hand, differential access to household appliances is dependent on public policy, not least as to whether and on what conditions electricity and gas are provided, for example. On the other hand, capacity to purchase, over and above income and price, depends upon availability of credit to smooth expenditure. There is a tendency to see credit as promoting diffusion; it makes possible in advance

¹¹ As recognized by Bowden and Offer, 'Technological revolution', p. 247.

¹² Bowden and Offer, 'Household appliances', p. 740; Bowden and Offer, 'Technological revolution', pp. 245, 261.

¹³ As reported in Bowden and Offer, 'Technological revolution', p. 257.

what would otherwise be impossible by outright purchase: 'Desire is stoked by advertising and facilitated by credit'.¹⁴

This may be so for individuals *ceteris paribus*, i.e. for manipulable preferences and given cash prices for goods. But, as is apparent, purchase on credit is extremely expensive once it takes account of the excessive levels of interest payments.¹⁵ Consequently, the particular conditions governing the availability of credit can also be considered to have *impeded* the diffusion of ownership by virtue of the high prices effectively charged. In addition, the targeting of advertising to those elite households which could more readily purchase appliances can have an impact upon the quality of the goods made available, making them unduly costly at the expense of higher volume lower quality, or less heavily designed, products serving uniform mass markets.¹⁶

Much of the foregoing is concerned with critical discussion of the factors that *influence* demand without, as yet, breaking fundamentally with the chosen inspiration provided by Becker. But what exactly is *demand* itself? In essence, this has been taken for granted by Bowden and Offer, with one exception provided by their discussion of 'arousal', in which the natural preference for goods is moved back one biological step from utility.¹⁷ The demand for time-using entertainment appliances is explained in terms of the natural human need attached to sensual stimulus, the ease with which these can be consumed, and the pace of technological progress in providing them cheaply. Bowden and Offer even argue that television viewing has addictive power.

Significantly, Becker's own theory of consumption is similarly based on biological considerations, presuming that all individuals have the same underlying preferences but that they learn differently what to enjoy through the differential accumulation of personal and social consumer capital. Consequently, for Becker, consumption paths, including addiction, are chosen in order to optimize. Having surveyed the options, we would choose whether to become addicted to television. Consequently, it becomes arbitrary, if not again tautological, to explain television viewing as irrational, especially when it is considered as a deliberate pre-commitment to pay excessive credit charges to become addicted to it.¹⁸

The demand for television suggests a further illustration of extrapolating from the discipline of time imposed by waged employment, for which time is usually seen as one-dimensional and activities are mutually exclusive. In contrast, within the home, one is not at work or at play. In terms of the radio, for example, women are liable to have been listening while doing the housework and, indeed, programmes have been so designed. Similarly,

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 246.

¹⁵ As recognized by Bowden and Offer, 'Household appliances', pp. 742-3; Bowden and Offer, 'Technological revolution', p. 254.

¹⁶ For such an argument, see Atkinson, 'Capabilities, exclusion, and the supply of goods'. See also Fine and Leopold, 'Consumerism and the industrial revolution'. For the view that such elite consumption obstructed rather than promoted a putative consumer revolution in the eighteenth century, see Fine and Leopold, *World of consumption*, ch. 7.

¹⁷ Bowden and Offer, 'Household appliances', p. 735.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 742-3.

the television (and video) are essential for time saving as far as childcare is concerned.¹⁹ In some respects, television and radio can be considered as comparable to lighting: it is likely that a household will own several appliances, and that they will be switched on whenever someone is in the house.

In this light, note how tautological the arguments become. Once a good, such as a television set, is bought, even if on hire purchase, insatiable demand would suggest it would always be in use since running costs are extremely low. As this is not so, Bowden and Offer introduce the value of time to explain the outcome. For television watching is given up, once the individual's sensual capacities have been worked sufficiently far down the marginal utility curve:

Our explanation is cast in terms of the marginal cost of discretionary time, and its marginal utility. Consumers have apparently given greater priority to enhancing the quality of discretionary time than to increasing its quantity. This reflects the uneven pace of technological change, which has found it easier to increase the attractions of leisure than to reduce the burden of housework.²⁰

No doubt, with different empirical outcomes, the priorities would be judged to be otherwise, indicating that the analysis has no explanatory content.

III

Apart from treating activities as mutually exclusive as far as time is concerned, a further deficiency in the account of demand by Bowden and Offer is the notion of appliance itself. So far, the discussion here has been careful, with a few necessary exceptions, to refer only to (domestic and household) appliances, although Bowden and Offer tend to alternate without thinking between the terms 'appliance' and 'durables'. But the two are very different, although Bowden and Offer probably intend the former to be a subset of the latter. Without wishing to be pedantic, a durable is simply something that lasts for what is an ill-defined length of time. It is a universal category without historical content. The household enjoys a very wide range of durables, from plastic buckets, fixtures and fittings, clothing, stores of food, other household effects, through to the putative categories of time-saving and time-using appliances themselves. An immediate issue is why the approach of Bowden and Offer should not apply to all of these durables.

Appliances, on the other hand, especially with the terms 'domestic' or 'household' appended, are a different matter. As a sub-category of dur-

¹⁹ As recognized in *ibid.*, p. 743, Bowden and Offer, 'Technological revolution', p. 261, and, even if with some inconsistency, Bowden and Offer, 'Household appliances', p. 739. See also Seiter, *Sold separately*.

²⁰ Bowden and Offer, 'Household appliances', p. 732. See also *ibid.*, pp. 727, 738, and 744, where equalities of marginal utilities are attached to the idea of equilibrium outcomes, a peculiarity in view of the wish to explain extensive economic and social change.

ables, they are socially and historically specific. They simply did not exist prior to the twentieth century—there were Elizabethan durables, if not domestic appliances. The notion of appliances is a socially constructed category, not only in the sense that electricity and white goods have to have been invented and made, but as to what counts as an appliance in practice. This is variable—does it now include an electric kettle or an iron?—and, without going into detail, it depends upon how the goods concerned are designed, produced, sold, used, and construed as objects. Do antique carpets or works of art count as household durables?

Yet again, it is to be suspected that the notion of appliance as durable has been gleaned by extrapolation from the economic theory of the market economy. In this context, the parallel durable is fixed capital. As such, it is tied both conceptually and chronologically to a more precise definition, whether satisfactory or not. Fixed capital is durable in the sense that it cannot be changed in the short run, when employment and output decisions are presumed to be made. By the same token, it lasts beyond the period of a single cycle of production for output. For convenience, in constructing national and corporate accounts, fixed capital is also presumed to depreciate at a definite rate so that it lasts for a particular period of time.

Such considerations cannot apply to the household because, unlike the capitalist enterprise, it is not motivated by a profit *rate*, which is necessarily tied to time. What would constitute the length of time of the production period for the household beyond which an appliance qualifies as a durable? Should it be daily or annual, by the regularity of wage or other payment, or even inter-generational? There can be no answer and, as a result, a slightly separate consideration has been brought into play concerning how goods are purchased. Both fixed capital and household appliances are heavily associated with the use of credit. Consequently, appliances usually constitute a high expenditure relative to income, with goods losing the status of appliance as income increases relative to their price. But this need not be the case, and how and whether goods are treated as appliances or not inevitably depends upon the commercial strategy of those providing them rather than exclusively upon their physical properties of durability and service to the optimizing consumer.

IV

The discussion has focused mainly on the difficulties that arise from the deployment of neoclassical economics to create simple and general concepts to categorize and to explain the diffusion of household durables/appliances. Is there an alternative for what is undoubtedly a significant area for economic and social research on the twentieth century as a consumer (durable) society?²¹

Elsewhere, it has been argued that a general theory of consumption is

²¹ Although this term is itself ambiguous: Fine and Leopold, *World of consumption*, ch. 6.

inappropriate.²² More specifically, first, durables do not form a general category open to a common theory, as each is determined by a varied and complex interaction of underlying factors. There is the need for a theoretically informed, interdisciplinary but product-specific consideration of consumption. Despite belonging to the same household, the video, the telephone, the car, and the washing machine are part of very different worlds. Although allocated to the same category of durables, such goods have little in common except that they last a long time—as indeed do books and many other goods that are not considered durables.

Now, it is inevitable that certain goods, including durables, have characteristics in common—in how they are used or how they are sold—giving rise to empirical generalities. Is it not possible to address such regularities analytically whether in the fashion of Bowden and Offer or otherwise? As argued by Fine and his co-authors, the potential for such interconnections across goods is almost unlimited at the level of consumption itself because of, for example, life-style packaging or the more pervasive potential for cultural linkages to be forged across goods.²³ Consequently, the properties of goods as items of consumption cannot serve as the basis for a causal analysis. Rather, why certain goods become associated with one another has itself to be explained, and this explanation requires examination of their provision prior to consumption. If not only consumption but also provision is integrated across goods, then a more general but historically specific category will be created—use of credit and dedicated stores in the case of household appliances, for example. The latter category cannot be derived, as Bowden and Offer attempt to derive it, from abstract, ahistorical principles.

Nor is this a recipe for abandoning theory altogether and resorting to historical and empirical contingency. For, second, the study of durables can move beyond household demand decisions alone to consider the more general processes and structures by which specific consumption is provided, through what has been termed *integral systems of provision*. Consumer choice should not be seen as the aggregated, even if market-coordinated, outcome of isolated and independent individuals or households. Rather, such choice is the consequence of definite socioeconomic processes, which are inevitably going to create uniformities across individuals, in terms of both the creation and the exercising of their preferences. In other words, choice is as much about the action of socioeconomic processes on individuals as it is about the latter's independent and exogenous room for manoeuvre.

Consequently, consumer choice is liable to trace out definite patterns across the population, in which variables such as socioeconomic status and household composition in terms of gender and age will be of importance. The various patterns of consumption that do or do not arise by different socioeconomic classifications give rise to norms of consumption. Crucially, a norm of consumption in this sense is not to

²² Ibid.; Fine et al., *Consumption in the age of affluence*.

²³ Fine et al., *Consumption in the age of affluence*.

be interpreted as a common level, whether some measure of average or not. Rather, the norm is supposed to reflect the presence or absence of patterns of consumption that differ systematically across the population. For some goods, a television set or a lottery ticket for example, consumption is so common as to constitute a norm in the sense that more or less everybody has one. Ownership of other, luxury goods tends to be confined to the wealthy and those of a particular socioeconomic class—an example would be a country estate. It is even possible to perceive the norm for a consumption good to be what might be termed null, one of random distribution across the population—speculatively, whether hair is short or long, for example.

In short, choice is to be interpreted as a social outcome whose systematic patterns must be identified in the form of norms of consumption. Although this does not imply that income and prices are unimportant in determining consumer choice, it does place them further in the background relative to other determinants. Second, then, the latter have yet to be specified. The definition and, where possible, the empirical identification of norms of consumption does not, in and of itself, explain why they should have arisen in the form in which they have—including the possibility of null norms, for which analysis would need to explain why socioeconomic processes have not ground out systematic patterns of consumption. This leads to the hypothesis that the way in which social norms are constructed will differ from one consumption good to the next. Rather than relying upon a general theory, such as utility maximization, that applies ‘horizontally’ across all consumption goods, the goods should be differentiated from one another, and the explanation for their consumption rooted in a ‘vertical’ analysis. This involves tracing their origins from production through to consumption, and the material culture surrounding them, incorporating the roles of technology, distribution, design, retailing, and so on.

The focus, then, must be upon specific products and the chain of activities around them, rather than the imposition of general considerations across a range of consumption goods, as in the optimising consumer of neoclassical economics, or the extrapolation from specifics (as is often the conclusion drawn from case studies from Veblen onwards). From the perspective offered here, Coffin offers an exemplary commentary on what needs to be done as well as a case study for the sewing machine: ‘I deliberately bring together subjects that are usually treated separately: family incomes and credit payments, construction of femininity and methods of marketing, and advertising, sexology, and models of the female body.’²⁴

More generally, the most important collections of case studies and essays provided by Brewer and Porter and by de Grazia and Furlough²⁵

²⁴ Coffin, ‘Credit, consumption, and images’, p. 751. See also *idem*, ‘Consumption, production, and gender’, p. 113. Note that she observes how the sewing machine bridges labour and product markets in the relations between the formal economy and the household: *ibid.*, p. 140.

²⁵ Brewer and Porter, eds., *Consumption and the world of goods*; de Grazia and Furlough, eds., *The sex of things*.

can be interpreted along these lines. The thematic essays are either product-specific in practice and/or erroneous in generalizing from specific products. De Grazia correctly lays out the issues involved: 'Thus, consumption is discussed here in terms of processes of commodification, spectatorship, commercial exchanges, and social welfare reforms, processes that involve the desire for and sale, purchase, and use of durable and non-durable goods, collective services, and images.'²⁶ Further, earlier work is criticized:

Such approaches have tended to discourage analysis of processes of signification in the light of varying historical legacies, such as might be shaped by diverse processes of state building, or by the relative power of the market, or by varying patterns of accumulation of . . . 'cultural capital'. . . . Such interactions are central, for they may account for politically significant differences in the evolution of the responses to changes in consumption habits within and across societies, and the diverse play of institutions, state, market, and family.²⁷

The additional insight offered here is that such imperatives can legitimately operate only on the basis of product-specific systems of provision. These are ground out and distinguished from one another historically and socially rather than reflecting an ahistorical and asocial economy of time, arousal, or whatever.²⁸

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²⁶ de Grazia, 'Introduction', p. 4.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 7. See also Auslander, 'Gendering of consumer practices', p. 101.

²⁸ See also Peiss, 'Making up, making over', pp. 312-13: 'Given the incipient state of the field, generalizations are not yet warranted. Buying a lipstick and buying a car, for instance, are different consumer acts occurring in distinct discursive and social contexts, although both involve, among other things, consumption, appearance, and identity.' Note that a lipstick, like many other cosmetics, is a *durable*.

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